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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the trend of current U.S. television commercial informativeness by comparing the results with Alan Resnik and Bruce Stern's previous benchmark study conducted in 1977. A systematic random sampling procedure was used to select viewing dates and times of commercials from the three national networks. Ultimately, a total of 550 selected TV commercials, which aired during morning, afternoon, and evening during the week of January 6-14, 1990, were recorded for scrutinizing. Information content for each television advertisement was evaluated by using the evaluative criteria developed by the Resnik and Stern study. Results revealed a dramatic improvement of television informativeness since 1977, while major independent variables affecting informativeness were still broadcast times and dates as well as the product categories. Results also revealed that weekday morning and weekend evening commercials had the highest levels of informativeness. Findings suggest that TV commercials have been substantially improved in terms of informativeness over the past decade. American consumers tend to be more information oriented than in the past, and ads need to provide more information to fulfill their needs for product survival. Five tables of data are included; 18 references are attached. (KEH)

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A STUDY OF INFORMATION CONTENT IN THE US TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: HAS IT BECOME LESS INFORMATIVE BUT MORE CREATIVE?

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A STUDY OF INFORMATION CONTENT IN THE US TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: HAS IT BECOME LESS INFORMATIVE BUT MORE CREATIVE?

Abstract

This research investigated the tendency of current US television commercial informativeness by comparing its results to Resnik's benchmark in 1977. Research identified a declining pattern of informativeness from afternoon till primetime telecasts vis-a-vis the increasing trend in '77. Justification attributed to dreadful cost of network time and shorter duration of commercial unit. Results supported that less informative ads appeared on weekends comparing to weekdays broadcast. Nonetheless, the informativeness of television ads were inclined to escalate.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising content has long been of interest among researchers, critics and public policy makers due to the high potential for shaping viewers purchasing behavior and the vast integration of media messages into Americans daily life. This research is then aiming at investigating informative content of advertising in the United States television commercials in particular. The motives for focusing on TV advertisements are because television appears to be the most appealing and effective medium due to its combined illustration of visuals and sounds. Besides, television commercials have been vigorously attacked as being materialistic, manipulative, deceptive, in poor taste, intrusive, the source of entry barriers, supportive of bad programming and uninformative (Aaker, 1984). This research will attempt to obliterate the claim and study the trend of US television commercial informativeness by comparing the results with the previous studies since 1977.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review will focus on informativeness of advertisements based on earlier research which has been done along two lines: by using content analysis approach and consumer-based approach. Moreover, the studies on informative content of print magazine ads in particular, and the cross cultural aspects of advertising informativeness will also be reviewed.

THE CONTENT ANALYSIS APPROACH

TV Commercial Informativeness

In a peerless effort to measure the informativeness of TV commercials using content analysis, Resnik and Stern (1975) constructed an operational

definition with 14 evaluative criteria to judge 378 national TV ads (Table 1). According to their operational definition, every commercial transmits certain information through visual and stimuli should provide meaningful cues to at least part of the audience. In order for a commercial to be considered informative, the cues must assist a typical viewer to make a more intelligent buying decision after exposed to the commercial than without seeing it.

Resnik and Stern (1977) used a multi-stage random sampling procedures to select commercials, viewing days and times. An equal number of commercials from the three major networks were viewed during the weekends and weekdays, and during morning (8:00 - 12:00 noon), afternoon (12:00 noon - 4:00 PM) and evening (7:00 - 11:00 PM) time intervals. When evaluating the commercials against the criteria, a question was asked, "does the advertisement communicate any of the following cues (Table 1) about the product, service, or institution?"

TABLE 1: ***Resnik & Stern (1975) 14 Evaluative Criteria***

1. Price or Value	8. Safety
2. Quality	9. Taste
3. Performance	10. Packaging or Shape
4. Components/Contents	11. Nutrition
5. Availability	12. Independent Research
6. Special Offers	13. Company Sponsored Research
7. Guarantee or Warrantees	14. New Ideas

The research indicated less than one-half of the ads (49.2%) were deemed informative on one criterion, 16% on two criteria and 1% on three criteria. Sixty percent of weekday morning and evening commercials proved to be informative, while most of the telecast during weekday afternoons and the weekend mornings were less informative. A relationship between the product categories and the informative levels existed. Less than 50% of TV commercials featured food, personal care, laundry and household products tended to be informative (45.8%, 39.8% and 46.2% respectively), while those for institutional, toys, hobbies, transportation and others had a higher proportion of informativeness (75%, 69% and 58.3%). The implications of their study were that least informative ads were an insinuated admission of the product failure when fulfilling the needs of the customers. An undoubtable encumbrance is how to persuade the increasingly better educated audience and sophisticated consumers. The least informative contents were broadcasted towards a large children base as target audience (weekend mornings).

Resnik and Stern's findings were confirmed in the Reid and Rotfeld study (1977) on "How Informative are Ads on Children's TV Shows?" Reid and Rotfeld studied 324 Saturday morning network commercials which were taped before and evaluated against Resnik's 14 cues. Results revealed that less than half of the TV ads were informative (42.3%). The informative value of commercials, however, did not curtail as TV audience switched to children.

Tom, et al., (1981) replicated Resnik and Stern's sampling and experimental procedures in their study. Again the results supported the two earlier studies, Resnik & Stern (1977) and Reid & Rotfeld (1981). The informativeness, viewing times and product related factors of TV commercials

had not yet changed significantly during that five years period since the Resnik & Stern benchmark inquisition.

Nevertheless, the trend of TV commercials' informativeness had gradually changed with an improvement as found in Weinberger et al.'s study in 1985. The craze of overall informativeness of U.S. TV ads during the period of 10 years can be illustrated in the table below (Table 2):

TABLE 2 : The trend of overall informativeness of US TV ads form '75 - '85

YEAR	RESEARCHERS	TOTAL NOS. EVALUATED	INFORMATIVE TV ADS : 1 CUE
1977	Resnik & Stern	378	49.2%
1983	Reid & Rotfeld	324	42.3%
1984	Tom et al.	348	52.8%
1985	Weinberger et al.	566	64.5%

Print Advertisement Informativeness:

Using the same classification as Resnik and Stern's, Laczniak (1978) conducted research on print ads informativeness and found that 92% of print ads sampled contained some useful information (at least one cue), whereas 59% had two information cues and 49% had three. Stern, Krugman and Resnik (1987) found similar results for a larger and broader sample on magazine advertisements.

Some recent researchers used the content analysis approach with the same criteria (Resnik & Stern 1977) for evaluation when studied other aspects related to informativeness of print advertisements' contents.

Harman, Rassauk and Stern (1983) tried to find out whether or not comparative advertisements have more information content than non-comparative ads. The nature of information content in comparative ads and the relationship between the product category and level of information content in ads were also taken into account. Full page ads were clipped from 1980's Ladies Home Journal, Newsweek, Esquire and Reader's Digest. A total of 2,395 ads were collected for analysis. They found out that comparative advertisements comprised more information cues (90.7%) than non-comparative ads (59.7%) significantly.

In Harman et al. study, unquestioning comparison ads were found to have more significant information cues than implied comparison ads which, in turn, had more information cues than non-comparative ads. Such findings supported the original intent of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) which encouraged comparison in advertising in order to provide consumers with information when making a more informed choice between competing products (Wilkie & Farris, 1975).

Regarding the relationship between informative content and the product categories, Harman's study indicated that the comparative advertisements between two products for durable goods contained a greatest number of information cues. Durable products are relatively involved intricate decision making process, nonetheless, such processes provide

various opportunities for objective comparison of numerous features and benefits. Contrarily, advertisements for food and drink related products contained the fewest cues and were judged to the least informative. The only exception is laundry and household products where true comparison ads contained more cues than implied comparison ads.

Cross Cultural Studies on TV Commercials informativeness

Cross cultural research in this area has been principally dealing with two problems: the decision of whether to individualize advertising messages in every country or to standardize the ads worldwide (Marquez, 1979), and how cultural and economic differences affect informativeness of advertisements.

The cross cultural studies in this area have been undertaken among three different countries, ranging from developing, newly developed and fully developed economic status. (Ecuador by Renforth and Raveed, 1983; Australia by Dowling, 1980; U.K. by Weinberger and Spotts, 1989) Renforth and Raveed (1983) and Dowling's study both duplicated Resnik and Stern's sampling and experimental procedures attempted to draw comparison with relevant U.S. findings. One dissimilarity in Dowling's study was that the TV commercials were all "regional ads" rather than "national ads" because TV commercials in Australia were not produced nor broadcasted on national basis.

The following table (Table 3) summed up their studies:

TABLE 3 : Summary of the comparisons on informativeness of TV ads among different countries.

COUNTRY	TOTAL ADS.	% OF ADS. *	RATIO OF INFORMATIVE TO NONINFORMATIVE ADS (: 1 CUE)		
			MORNING	AFTERNOON	EVENING
The U.S.	348	49.2 %	0.8 : 1	0.67 : 1	5 : 1
Australia	239	74 %	7 : 1	4 : 1	2 : 1
Ecuador	108	82.4 %	6 : 1	5.8 : 1	3.3 : 1

NOTE: (*) means that the sampled TV commercials satisfied one or more informative criteria defined by Resnik and Stern.

Sources: Renforth and Raveed, 1983; Dowling, 1980; Weinberger and Spotts, 1989

Dowling (1980) research found that in Australia that the ratio of informativeness to noninformativeness declined in a reverse pattern from the U.S., especially on weekdays, the relationship between informativeness and product categories followed the same trend. Television commercials for food, institutional and personal care products were lower in informativeness than the remaining product categories (69 : 83% for Australia and 46 : 56% for the U.S.).

Renforth and Raveed (1983) study showed that Ecuadorian commercial patterns tended to follow the Australian informativeness according to

broadcast time. However, the type of product advertised did not account for significant differences in the commercial informativeness in Ecuador.

An assumption that can be made based on these two research results is that product life cycle factor might account for high informativeness in both Australia and Ecuador. Many products which have reached maturity stage in developed economy (United States) may yet be innovation or growth product in lesser developed economies (Australia and Ecuador respectively). The proportion of mature products in an economy is likely to increase directly with the stage of economic development. To provide information may be an especially important task in the arena of a developing country where people may not always be aware of the possibilities which new products offer (Renforth and Raveed, 1983).

The information content of United Kingdom ads (Weinberger and Spotts, 1989) was slightly different as the study utilized both 14 cues and the FCB matrix which cross examines product decision-making situations along two dimensions high/low involvement and thinking/feeling. The study judged 867 ads in which 566 were U.S. and 301 U.K.'s. They found that the informativeness of the U.S. ads had increased significantly since 1977. About sixty-five percent of full sample were informative, compared to 53.6% in the U.K. The low versus high involvement and rational (thinking) products were advertised with higher informativeness than the low/high involvement and emotional (feeling) ones. The relatively low informativeness of British ads mainly lied in the belief common in the U.K. that the U.S. ads are more "hard sell".

Cross Cultural Studies on magazine advertisements informativeness

Although magazine advertising is more informative than television counterparts in the U.S. as already mentioned, it was not apparent how magazine advertising in the US compared with magazine advertising in other cultures until Madden et al (1986) have done a study on cross-cultural content analysis of US and Japanese magazine advertisements. The study was also a partial replication of the content analysis of US magazine advertising conducted by Stern, Keruzman and Resnik (1987) which used the established Resnik-Stern classification of information cues. A total of 1,440 advertisements from six categories of magazines (general, sports, entertainment, women's, men's and professional) in both English and Japanese versions were used. Among 1440 ads, 832 were from American magazines and 608 from Japanese magazines which clipped from May/June 1984. It was found that advertisements in Japanese magazines were generally more informative than American counterparts. More than 85% of Japanese advertisements analyzed satisfied at least one criterion for informative content compared to only 75% of the American advertisements. When the number of cues was increased to two, Japanese advertisements registered a moderate decline (to 61%) in information content while US magazine ads showed a sharp drop (to 39%). In short, when more information cues taken into account, the smaller percentage of U. S. advertisements compared to Japanese advertisements which were more informative.

The specific information used most often in Japanese magazine ads was price (59.2%) comparing to US magazine advertisements (72.9%). On the contrary, American ads tended to make far more use of special offers (76%) than Japanese ads did (6%). This may attribute to the Japanese customs of

avoiding a hard-sell approach in mass communication while emphasizing promotion at the point of sale. Moreover, it was found out that head-on conflicts with competition are usually avoided. Japanese advertising's role is to please the prospect as circumventing a direct sale.

Japanese consumers demands high standard in sense of cleanliness and more information such as product safety, guarantees of merchandise, accidents and defects, thus advertisements need to be more information oriented.

Hong, Muderrisoglu and Zinkhan (1987) investigated how different cultures influence advertising expression in terms of emotional appeals, informativeness and use of comparative appeals. The findings once again confirmed the same trend as Madden et al's study (1986) in terms of informativeness. Ninety-five percent of Japanese ads consisted at least one information cue compared to 50% of American ads which were considered informative by the same criterion. The average number of information cues for Japanese ads was 2.20 compared to 1.70 for American counterparts.

THE CONSUMER-BASED APPROACH

TV commercial informativeness:

The major difference between the content analysis approach and the consumer-based approach is that in the former, informativeness is evaluated from the researchers' definition of information while the latter is judged from the consumers' perspective.

As far as the audience perception-based measures are concerned, Bauer and Greyser's study (1968) found that less than 5.8% of American TV commercials were perceived as being informative. However, such tendency was found positively changed in Aaker and Norris's study (1982). Another study using a different scale to provide additional consumer perspective was conducted by Aaker in 1984. Aaker's study reported that well over half the consumers felt that average drug (62.5%) and automobile (47.5%) commercials help them either to buy or to use the product, while the experts had a relatively low opinion of the commercial informativeness (pharmacists 29.4%, car dealers 32.1% and independent writer 25.4%). The difference of informative levels was caused by experts' bias against TV ads and more qualifications in the evaluation process.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on research conducted in the area of informative content of TV commercials since Resnik and Stern's benchmark study in 1977, it appears to be that TV commercials have been increased in its information contents as exhibited in TABLE 2. This might be actuated by the fact of the improvement of general education standard and a wide variety of population in terms of ethnic and cultural differences. Thus, the following are hypothesized:

H1 : The informative values of U.S. television commercials is likely to increase.

H2 : A relationship is existed between product/services categories and the informative values.

H3 : A relationship should exist in between broadcast times and television commercials informative values in the following ways:

A. Prime time television commercials has more informative values, i.e. positively related.

B. Weekend television commercials has less informative values, i.e. negatively related.

Operational definitions

In this research, Stern and Resnik's (1977) operational definition for useful information which consisted of 14 criteria (TABLE 1) was exercised. Such criteria to describe useful information is similar to the concept of direct information suggested by Nelson (1974).

Informative advertisements are defined as convincing, effective and interesting materials which should draw audience attention.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling

A systematic random sampling procedure was used to select viewing dates and times of commercials from national networks: ABC, CBS and NBC. Ultimately, a total of 550 selected TV commercials which aired during morning, afternoon and evening dayparts during the week of January 6th-14th, 1990, were recorded for scrutinizing.

Television commercials were taped between the following time intervals: weekdays from 9:00 to 12:00 AM., 12:00 to 4:00 PM., and 7:00 to 11:00 PM. and weekends from 8:00 to 12:00 AM., 12:00 to 4:00 PM. and 7:00 to 11:00 PM. Only the original identical advertisements telecasted during the same period were included in the sample. Nevertheless, the rerun of the commercials

would be used only if they were aired during different time periods. Such process permitted researchers to find any significant or intriguing relationship between the commercial informative level and the broadcast times (different dayparts).

Measures

A bilingual graduate student and an American graduate student jointly evaluated the information content of each television advertisement by asking the following question: does this advertisement communicate any of the criteria listed in TABLE 1? Since all television advertisement were video recorded which allowed adequate time for individual judgement and analyzing. Thus, the inter-judging helped increase this research reliability. The intercoder reliability was 0.91.

FINDINGS

The findings from data analysis of the total 550 TV commercials showed a dramatic improvement of the U.S. TV commercial informativeness since Resnik and Stern's study in 1977. The major independent variables affecting informativeness were still broadcast times and dates as well as the product categories which were illustrated in the TABLE 5.

TABLE 5 is here

The results indicated that more than half of the sampled commercials (75%) were deemed "informative" at least in one criterion. Such findings supported the first hypothesis.

The weekday morning and weekend evening commercials were found the highest informativeness, 90.9% and 81.8% respectively. These findings reinforced the informative pattern found in Resnik and Stern's research (1977). Nevertheless, the commercials aired during the weekday evenings were proved less informative than they used to be in Resnik and Stern's study (Table 4). The informative value dropped during the weekday evenings was also noticed. When comparing Resnik et al. study, an opposite trend of informativeness occurred between afternoon and evening periods.

Table 4 : Comparison of informativeness during weekdays time periods

SAMPLE/CONDITION	INFORMATIVE ADS (AS A %) 1990	INFORMATIVE ADS (AS A %) 1977
Weekday Morning Ads	90.9%	57.1%
Weekday Afternoon Ads	77.3%	33.3%
Weekday Evening Ads	72.7%	60.3%

Interestingly, the figures revealed a lower percentages of informativeness in weekend morning commercials (62.3%), especially Saturday mornings where the largest proportion of the audience were children. This finding supported both Resnik and Stern's as well as Reid and

Rotfeld's studies. As for Sunday morning where largest audience were more religious, the low percentage of informativeness might account for the nature and repetition of commercials aired during that period. Most of them are for religious purposes such as religious books and cassette tapes which they used different advertising themes and target at a particular segment in the markets. These indications supported the hypothesis 3B.

The nature of products also seemed to account for differences in informative values as hypothesized. All products communicated in the commercials were categorized into relatively homogeneous classifications. Commercials for food, personal care, hobby-toy-transportation and institutions tended to be less informative than those for medications, laundry and household and other products. Nevertheless, the informative gaps caused by different product categories were not as wide as in the previous study of Resnik and Stern (1977).

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, the most supporting results of this study pointed out the fact that U.S. TV commercials have been substantially improved in terms of informativeness over the past decade. This trend of increasing informativeness is shown in TABLE 5. The findings also supported the hypothesis that US TV commercials tend to be improved in informative level.

Table 6 : An Overall Trend of TV Ads Informativeness From '75 - '90

YEAR	TOTAL NOS EVALUATED	INFORMATIVE TV ADS: 1 CUE
1975	378	49.2%
1977	324	42.3%
1981	348	52.8%
1985	566	64.5%
1990	550	75.0%

An important signification that can be made here is that American consumers tend to be more information oriented than in the past and ads need to provide more information to fulfill their needs for the product survival. This might be the result of an increase in better educated, more aware and more sophisticated consumers in the U.S. A noninformative advertising policy may self destruct by virtue of the fact that the consumers will seek relevant product information and purchase those products (Resnik & Stern, 1977).

According to Renforth and Raveed (1983), products in less economically developed countries may be in the earlier stage of the product life cycle than those in higher economically developed ones. Commercials for the products in the introduction stage tend to be more informative, while the opposite is true for products in the maturity stage. Therefore, commercials in Australia and Ecuador were found more informative than those in the U.S. due to their less economic development and consequently being in the earlier stage of the products advertised.

Nonetheless, American market is also becoming more heterogeneous in terms of racial and ethnic groups such as Asians, Hispanics and others. Products which reach the maturity stage in the product life cycle and are likely to be noninformative in the U.S. might still need to provide some information for this new target market which continues to grow all over the country. Ads then have to increase the informative value to reach this target group instead of only American consumers.

A limitation, however, must be kept in mind in evaluating the results from this study. The research was conducted from a means that the researcher is an alien in investigating U.S. ads and marketing system. Although an American coder jointly assessed the sampled commercials in order to reduce unreliability due to language barrier, some mistakes might be inevitable.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As Resnik and Stern's study (1977) showed the tendency of informativeness was quite clear that it was likely to increase when commercial telecasted from morning till evening primetime. Contrarily, this research study attested that a decline trend occurred when entering the primetime (see Table 4). The following discussion is initiated.

First of all, the unit cost of network commercial time has been surmounting to the stage where every gigantic corporations and national advertisers have to reconsider their advertising strategies. Last year several largest national advertisers in their last quarter decided to reallocate networks TV advertising budget to print media and to cable TV. Such deliberated moves taken by national advertisers were quite obvious to understand. These

cancellations and reallocations strongly signified the doubtfulness of using television to advertise.

Moreover, advertisers questioned about the deliverability of network TV and the unrealistic prices for airing commercials. How many advertisers can afford to buy a :30 TV commercial spot during Superbowl game? Two years ago when ABC network guaranteed advertisers to deliver a certain ratings during the 1988 summer Olympic games which consequently turned out to compensate different daypart spots during regular programming for advertisers. What a joke?

Secondly, all TV networks have been accepting shorter TV commercials (15 seconds) since 1987. Such shorter TV commercials accounted for almost 30% of networks inventory. The percentage of airing shorter television commercials has jumped triple folds. Once when shorter commercials are accepted, seemingly, it then creates a chaotic situation in creative development for commercials. The question lies whether creative people have adequate time to say whatever they intend to say to consumers or simply just remind them the advertiser's name. It looks like the latter is the case. Is brand attention more important than informing consumers the product itself?

Finally, will informativeness of advertisements be discounted in order to give way to shorter and yet meaningless commercials? Obviously, shorter TV commercials will never have enough information as comparing to longer commercials such as 60 seconds. Will creativity then be hindered by such shorter duration? Will less informative commercials be contributed to more

creative and original ads on TV? Such question definitely need to be addressed and further research is inevitably necessary.

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TABLE 5 PROPORTION OF TELEVISION ADS EVALUATED AS INFORMATIVE

SAMPLE/CONDITION	NOS. EVALUATED	INFORMATIVE ADS (AS A %)
Total Sample of Ads	550	75.0%
Total Weekday Ads	330	80.3%
Weekday Morning Ads	110	90.9%
Weekday Afternoon Ads	110	77.3%
Weekday Evening Ads	110	72.7%
Total Weekend Ads	330	74.1%
Weekend Morning Ads	110	62.3%
Weekend Afternoon Ads	110	78.2%
Weekend Evening Ads	110	81.8%
Total Morning Ads	220	76.6%
Total Afternoon Ads	220	77.8%
Total Evening Ads	220	77.3%
Food Ads	160	69.4%
Hobby, Toy & Transportation Ads	62	70.9%
Personal Care Ads	60	71.7%
Institutional Ads	86	72.1%
Other Product Ads	74	75.7%
Laundry & Household Product Ads	40	80.0%
Medication Ads	68	89.7%

NOTE: NUMBER OF ORIGINAL ADS EVALUATED : 550
TOTAL NUMBER OF ADS EVALUATED (INCLUDING RERUN) : 660